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JOHN SINGLETON COPLEY

Editor of THE COLLECTOR:

I HAVE several family portraits which have come to me from my maternal grandfather and which were painted by an artist named Copley, in Boston. Can you give me any information in regard to this painter. The pictures are very precious to me, and I would like to know all I can about their authorship. Please reply in THE COLLECTOR and oblige
AN OLD SUBSCRIBER.
LYNN, Mass.

John Singleton Copley was the son of an Irishman who died in the West Indies in 1737. As far as can be ascertained the artist was born on July 3d of the same year in Boston, whither his parents had emigrated the year before. Ten years later the Widow Copley married one Pelham, who was a dabster at drawing and engraving, and from whom his stepson doubtless acquired his first hints at art. The youth of our first American historical painter, for such Copley really was, though his choice of subjects was anything but American, is involved in a singular obscurity. About all that is known of it is what he used to tell himself, and even he had but a vague idea of his earlier years. It is a tolerably well-authenticated fact, however, that he was the creator of his own art, and that he never saw a decent picture till he had long learned to paint very fair ones himself. He began to paint, like Benjamin West, with colors and brushes of his own manufacture, and one of his pet yarns of his boyhood related to his being arrested for violating a Boston blue law by going sketching on Sunday. He is said to have received a little instruction from a Scotch painter named Smybert, who came to America in 1728, and died when Copley was fourteen; but whatever tutelage he obtained from him cannot have amounted to much. At any rate, in 1754 he was making some sort of a living as a painter and helping to take the place, as provider, of his stepfather, who had died three years before.

He painted miniatures and acquired some repute, George Washington being one of his sitters in 1756. In 1760 he sent a portrait of his half-brother, unsigned and undated, to Benjamin West, in London. This was the picture known as "The Boy and the Flying Squirrel." West is reported to have gone into ecstasies over it. Contrary to the rules of the Royal Academy, which give anonymous works the cold shoulder, he had it hung there, and, ferreting out its author, invited him to London. But Copley did not accept the invitation. In 1769 he married the daughter of a Boston merchant, a great beauty, whose heart he had first assailed while painting her portrait, and who figures as the principal of the female group in the "Death of Major Pierson." She brought him money and wealthy connections. They lived on Beacon Hill till 1771, when he came to New York. But the Revolution was impending, and his father-in-law was a staunch Tory. It was to him, as agent of the East India Company, that the tea ships which the Bostonians raided were consigned. Between wife and father-in-law the artist was influenced, and in 1774 he sailed for England.

West fathered and Reynolds patted him on the back, so the aristocracy took him in hand. He painted himself to Italy by the lords and ladies who found it fashionable to help the American artist along, and studied in Rome and elsewhere on the Peninsula till his wife, having sold their Boston property, crossed the Atlantic after him, leaving on May 27, 1775, on the last ship that sailed from Massachusetts under the British flag. Copley joined her in London and settled down there, never to see America again. He painted his "Youth Rescued from a Shark" and his portraits and groups, on the strength of which he joined the Royal Academy, and took to historical painting. His "Death of Chatham" made a hit, and 2,500 impressions of the Bartolozzi plate, after it, were sold in a single run. But he made far less money out of his historical pictures than he expected. They took up much of his time that he might have profitably employed in portraiture. The plates were costly, too, and Bartolozzi took his own time in executing them, so, altogether, Copley seems to have been hard up pretty much all the time. Still he had some fine business connections. While in London all the wealthy or distinguished Americans sat for him; among them John Adams, whose picture is now in the University Hall at Cambridge. Perhaps the best picture outside of his portraits is Copley's "Death of Major Pierson." Heath engraved it, and it had an extensive sale. For "The Siege of Gibraltar" Copley went to Hanover to take the portraits of four of the generals of that country. This picture, completed in 1792, was engraved by Sharp. "The Surrender of Admiral de Windt to Lord Camperdown" came a few years later. Copley's picture of "Charles I Demanding the Five

Impeached Members" seems not to have been a popular one, on account of the subject. But whatever he turned out created a sensation, in spite of which he had to draw chronically on his American relatives to eke out his income. The fact is, Copley was fond of style, and indulged his weakness. Down to the time of his death, in September, 1815, he seems to have been on bad terms with his creditors constantly; but he, by all accounts, found great solace in his work, and whenever care pressed too heavily on him, turned to his easel and shook it off.

The works this man is perpetuated by have stood the critical test of our expanding taste far better than many others of his day. I remember his "Death of Chatham," in the National Gallery, as a peculiarly strong though conventional and certainly historically inaccurate canvas. Indeed, Copley took the most cold-blooded liberties with history whenever he fell foul of her. But, in compensation, he painted with extraordinary smoothness and care, drew well, and finished conscientiously. His color was rich, though somewhat sombre, and he had a keen eye for the harmonies. A feature that struck me about his pictures was his mania for working up the hands in them. But in his day the old German theory held full force, that no man was an artist who could not draw a perfect hand, and the man who could paint a perfect hand was an artist. Altogether, it seems to me that Copley's standing is assured beyond the possibility of shaking. He was the first American who lent any dignity to our art. He soared upward, in an age of portrait painters, almost to the level of legitimate history. The pictures he turned out in his American period were marvels when we consider the limited facilities from which they grew. When he got a chance to study he became conventional, it is true, but through all the studied precision of line and color which characterizes his latter productions there glows a certain suggestion of his early natural, though crude force. If Copley had been born a century later, I believe we would be looking up to him as a great man to-day.

The art interest of Copley expires with him. He left his heritage of talent to no descendant, but his family has enjoyed a somewhat interesting history since. He left six children, all born in America. One daughter lived an old maid to the age of ninety-five. His most noteworthy child was the son who became Lord Lyndhurst and High Chancellor of Great Britain. This boy, born on Beacon Hill, was bred an Englishman and a lawyer, and in 1817 was elected to the House of Commons to represent Yarmouth. In his eighty-eighth year, in 1860, he was an active member of the Lords. Lyndhurst died in 1863 with the title of the Nestor of the House of Lords, ashamed to the last of his American origin. The same sentiment seems to have pervaded his family. His sister, who wrote the pretentious biography of her father from which I quote, lays less stress on the eminence which made that parent illustrious than on the fact that he was the father of a real, live Lord. [Ed. THE COLLECTOR.]

Messrs. Bangs & Co. open the fall season on Tuesday next with a three-session sale of a mixed collection of books. Among them are a collection of dramatic literature and portraits, and another of works on natural history.

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The Prince de Cardé, the well-known collector, has purchased the autograph manuscript of Tasso's prose treatise in defense of his great poem. It is in 300 pages, and is believed to be with its erasures entirely in Tasso's handwriting.

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Some excellent pointers for philatelists might be compiled by anyone really experienced in the craft and willing to spare time enough to do so. A few which are, it seems to me, worth noting, are sent to me by a subscriber whom I have known as a collector for many years. He advises: 1st. That every collector keep a regular daily account of his business, purchases, trades, etc., letters received and from whom, cash expended, etc. This, of course, is simply common sense, for unless he has an account book to refer to, the collector cannot know how he stands at the end of the year. 2d. let him docket and file all letters, which is more common sense. 3d. let him preserve all philatelic papers, catalogues price lists, etc., for reference, which is again very good. 4th. he should have a special album or scrap book for odd or freak stamps, so as not to disturb the sequence and symmetry of his regular albums, while this process would provide him with a special collection interesting in itself. 5th. always to look carefully over lots of stamps which he may receive, so that he may not sell or trade off some interesting or valuable variety, water-mark, etc. 6th. to disinfect stamps received in lots. 7th. to subscribe for at least a couple of good philatelic papers, to make sure of getting the latest news. 8th. to look out for new issues or discoveries, and keep his memory awake to what he reads about them. It would appear obvious that stamp collectors would have sense enough to observe these rules instinctively, but only a very small minority actually do.